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ABSTRACT

This study compares the responses of black and white preservice teachers as they engaged about a young adult novel which addressed racial and sexual diversity. Student teachers used young adult literature with protagonists from diverse backgrounds as one means of coming to understand and value children of all backgrounds. Small groups met to discuss one book which was written by a black author, depicting the close relationship between a strong, self-assured black woman and her teenaged son. The book also addresses issues of homosexuality and interracial relationships. Data collection involved student reading journals and researcher observations of group discussions. Two themes emerged: finding oneself in a text (moving from margins to center) and becoming the other (moving from center to margins). Within these two themes, there were several categories: recognition of the author's purpose or values, response to being black in a white world, and response to being gay in a heterosexual world. The black teacher education students found themselves in their reading of the book, finding space to reflect on who they were and to release their own stories. The white teacher education students reflected that in their reading of the book they felt they needed to find a way in, but they generally remained looking in from outside. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Text and Context: Using Multicultural Literature to Help Teacher Education Students Develop Understanding of Self and World

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Text and Context: Using Multicultural Literature to Help Teacher Education Students Develop Understanding of Self and World

Judith Singer and Sally Smith

This study compares the responses of two groups of teacher education students, one predominantly Black and one mainly White, as they engaged with a young adult novel which addresses diversities of both race and sexual orientation. The authors of the study, teaching in different universities, each involved their students in reader response projects, using young adult literature with protagonists from diverse backgrounds as one means of helping teacher education students come to understand and value children of all racial, cultural, class and family backgrounds, including those from single-parent families and families headed by gay or lesbian parents. To share and extend their responses to the reading of the young adult novel we discuss below, students met weekly in small discussion groups. In each class, they kept response journals in which they recorded their reactions and reflections on the readings.

Socio-cultural learning theory defines learning as occurring through participation in joint, collective activity mediated by cultural tools (Wells, 1999; Wertsch, 1998). Through reading response in social contexts readers continue to build identities within specific cultural worlds (Galda & Beach, 2001; Sumara, 1996; Wilhelm, 1997). Such contexts can extend and clarify identity and understanding of the world. In this study, we examine how the larger socio-cultural contexts of the two groups of reader-participants may have affected their responses to the text, and how the text itself affected readers' engagement and stance (Galda & Beach, 2001). We ask how a book may be experienced differently by students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. We are particularly interested in how students who are commonly marginalized in children's literature respond when they find themselves at the center of a text. Conversely, we

asked what happens when students who are accustomed to locating themselves at the center of a story find themselves at the margins?

The experiences of the two groups of students were not parallel, although both found ways to rearrange their views of the world. Black students, in their engagement with the work of an author who understands the need for black people to tell their story, began to release their own stories. Black readers were startled to find a story that was theirs, and responded with relief and affirmation. The white students found themselves faced with a world view that placed them in the margins. The journal responses of these readers reveal that several struggled effectively through their engagement with an authentic text, while others responded with less insight to being startled and with the need to rearrange views and confront other live.

This study examines how these two groups of readers' engagement with young adult literature clarified their understandings of how they themselves were situated in relation to the text and the diverse perspectives embodied in the text. We questioned whether such engagement and reflection would help preservice and in service teachers "rearrange (their) views of the world" (Boomer, 1982). We believe students need to read literature which provokes them to question their assumptions about self and others and to recognize the influence of readers' and authors' contexts and purposes. This is best achieved by texts which set before the reader problematic aspects of difference. This type of experience can help teacher education students develop an appreciation for using children's and young adult literature to explore diverse perspectives in their own classrooms 9).

Theoretical Perspectives

A range of recent research has begun to look at the meaning of whiteness for White teachers (Frankenberg, 1993; McIntyre, 1994), as well as perspectives of teachers who are members of under-represented groups. However, an examination of potentially contrasting

perspectives of teachers from different racial and ethnic groups is rarely incorporated into the same study.

There is considerable research about the efficacy of literature discussion groups and response journals. Reading and responding to literature in these formats has been seen to provide effective means through which readers of different ages and backgrounds and in a variety of settings deepen their understanding of literature and of themselves (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Enciso, 1997). As readers express their transactions with literature through talk and written reflections, tacit beliefs and emerging understandings about their own situated identities are often revealed (Rosenblatt, 1978). Utilizing literature that is multicultural provides for diverse voices in the classroom, whatever the racial, gender, or cultural constituency of the class. The concept of multicultural literature used in the study includes books about people of color in the United States (Cai & Sims-Bishop, 1994; Sims-Bishop, 1993), as well as books which incorporate the experiences of White ethnic and cultural groups (Rochman, 1993).

The Text

This study focuses on text and context in the reading of From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun, a young adult novel by Jacqueline Woodson (1995). To examine the authenticity of characters and events in this socially and culturally conscious book, we used Sims' criteria (1982) to help us assess the author's purposes and writing. In looking at the author's awareness of and sensitivity to a culturally different American life experience, we concluded that Woodson portrays African American life from her own viewpoint and experience as an African American; characters are fully drawn with a range of relationships and experiences. Characters' lives are depicted as rich and complete within the Black community. Her portrait of an emerging lesbian relationship may be assumed to be accurate as the author is a lesbian. As a gay Black woman, her perspective is one of an insider to these two cultures. The author herself, responding to a question of her own

stance and perspective, said, "authors must have lived at least a part of the experience of the characters they place on the page" (1998). The voice in this novel is that of a young male. Although the author is a female, adult and adolescent readers and reviewers, including the readers of this study, found Melanin a believable and recognizable character (Horn Book, 1996; Smith, 1998).

The novel introduces several issues that have relevance for educators. It is written in a diary format that enables readers to know Melanin Sun as he records his on-going reactions and thoughts about events in his life. These events include his first feelings of attraction towards a girl, his mother's new love interest, and, most significantly, his mother's revelation that the new love interest in her life is a woman, a White woman.

Through Melanin's notebooks, we also meet his mother, Encanta, or E. C., a single parent with a warm, close relationship to her son. As the novel progresses, Melanin recounts his thoughts and experiences about racism, telling the reader that he has little use for White people in his world. When he learns that his mother is a lesbian, he is outraged, and at the same time terrified that he, too, will turn out to be gay. Gradually, Melanin's diary portrays his grudging respect for Kristen, his mother's lover, and a firmer sense of himself.

Each of the issues raised in this novel, including race, sexual orientation, and single parenting, potentially provides fertile ground to engage the reader in questioning tacit assumptions about self and other. However, the way in which a reader engages with these issues also reflects social, racial, gender and educational contexts that the reader brings to the book. To appreciate how readers respond to this text, an understanding of the contexts they bring to the book is crucial.

Participants and setting

The authors of this study are two white, female teacher educators in a major U. S.

metropolitan area, working with with contrasting student bodies. One group of students (Group A) was located on an urban campus, and consisted of fifteen undergraduate students, all of whom were women. Seven members of this group were African-American, four were Caribbean, two Latinas, one Egyptian, and one Irish-American. This group of students was older than traditional undergraduates, ranging in age between 22 and 45. Many held part-time or full-time jobs, and several had young children of their own. Many were the first members of their families to receive a college education. They participated in this project as part of an undergraduate curriculum and methods course.

An underlying theme in the methods course was learning how to build democratic, inclusive community in elementary school classrooms, using children's literature among other resources. During the semester, students read and discussed children's literature depicting a variety of cultural and historical settings. The entire class met in groups of three and four, over four sessions, to discuss From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun. This book was selected by the instructor/researcher because it had the potential to provide both resonance and a challenge for this group of mainly Black and Latina women, several of whom were single mothers. Written by a Black author, and depicting the close relationship of a strong, self-assured Black woman with her teenaged son, the book was expected to have powerful points of resonance for this group of readers. At the same time, the issues of homosexuality and an interracial relationship were likely to create tension and conflict for many of the same readers.

Students in Group B were enrolled in a graduate level children's literature class in a semi-surburban branch of a large public university. The group consisted of thirty-five students, thirty-two of whom were White working-class women. One Student was a White male, one student was Black and one was Asian American. Many of the students were second and third generation Italian American and Irish American, while others were Jewish Americans from Eastern European

ancestry. The majority of these students were teaching in public schools. Several were older, returning students who had children of their own. Five students from this group chose to read and respond to From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun. All of these were White and female.

Themes

Data collected and analyzed from student journals and observations of group discussions related to two broad themes:

"Finding Oneself in a Text: Moving from Margins to Center."

"Becoming the Other: Moving from Center to Margins."

Within these two broad themes, we identified several categories: recognition of the author's purpose or values; response to being Black in a White world; response to being gay in a heterosexual world. In this paper we address the themes as they relate to the category, being Black in a White world.

Discussion

The mostly Black readers of From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun in Group A responded with strong identification to aspects of the novel which directly address the issue of race. This identification is expressed below in response to passages in the book which describe how Melanin got his name.

> My favorite passage so far is when Melanin's mom assured the nurse that she was well aware that melanin is a pigment, a tint, a stain. The nurse couldn't see beyond his darkness, but his mother knew that not only was he black and beautiful, he was her gift from God and she was very proud, and deeply in love with him.

Another student in this group concurs:

> I love the story Mel retells on how his mother named him. "Melanin is what made him dark and Sun because when I look into his eyes I can see the sun shine through them."

Another emphasizes:

> Not only is Melanin's mother proud of her heritage, despite the negativity that is associated with having a darkly colored child in the black community, but she has celebrated the fact by proclaiming to the world that her son is the "light" of her world even though he is dark.

These readers were both surprised and pleased by the author's affirmation of skin color "despite the negativity that is associated with having a darkly colored child in the black community . . ." In this part of the novel, as these readers looked out at the world through the eyes of E. C., Melanin's mother, they found themselves strongly affirmed as Black women, and, for some, as single mothers. They reflected on a way of "rearranging the world" in which there is no "negativity" associated with a "darkly colored child."

A White reader from Group B also wrote positively about a book that introduces the connection of self-concept and race. She wrote about what she had gained from a book written by an "insider," someone who has experienced situations like those described in the book, and which provide entry to her, an outsider. The book affirmed her understanding of difference and the importance of learning about it. This young woman wrote:

> I like the line, "Melanin is what will make him strong." I see this sentence as an indication that this book will have something to do with racism and how a person's connection to his/her race will help make one strong.

Although she was somewhat distanced from this passage, appreciative, but not a participant, she was responsive to a passage that has deep importance to the Black readers of the book.

Other readers in the Group B raised questions about the meaning of color as it is discussed in the novel. A reader began with her own perception as a White person:

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> The first thing I thought about when I heard his name, Melanin, was that people all have a certain amount of melanin in their head, and when your melanin runs out, your hair turns gray. Now I learned that she named him Melanin after people kept questioning his color -- this raises different questions about racism -- is there racism among the Black community? Is it okay to be Black but not too dark? "Will he always be so dark" neighbors asked?

As this reader reflected on the comments of Black characters in the novel, she asked herself what she knows and doesn't know about being Black in a Black world. Thinking about this from her own position within a White world, she asked, "Is there racism in the Black community?" Another White reader from this group also questioned the novel's milieu and point of view, finding herself the outsider in the story.

> Melanin's description of a White person, "Those straight White people's teeth." "White, White, White, shimmery White people's hair."

While this reader did not explicitly comment on her own feelings about Melanin's descriptions of White people in this novel, the inclusion of the description reveals a beginning consciousness of being the "other" as a reader. In the process of trying to make sense of the story told in the novel, these three White readers were beginning to "rearrange (their) views" of how they might be seen as White people in a Black world. These students, living in predominantly white communities, taking classes in the overwhelmingly European American context of the graduate school, can be expected to have had few experiences that prepared them to examine the position of being the other.

Another passage addressing race which drew comments from readers in both groups involved an encounter at the beach between Melanin and a group of White boys. In their responses to this passage, Black readers described how being Black in a White world can be painful and engender feelings of rejection and anger, while White readers focused less on the

broader ramifications of race and more on Melanin's particular encounter. Readers from both groups who commented on this passage crossed the boundaries of gender and placed themselves in the skin of a Black adolescent boy. In the following journal entries from Group A, readers identified with Mel's feelings of rejection when he is taunted on the beach by the group of White boys.

> I understand what Melanin was feeling when he was walking down the beach and a bunch of White boys made mention of the color of his skin. He felt different, and he did not want to feel like that . . . I always felt like that growing up and I really never spoke about it or wrote about it. Maybe some of the issues that I am bottling today could have been resolved a long time ago.

In the process of identifying with Melanin Sun, this reader offered a possibility of change, of rearranging of the world, at least with respect to undoing the internal damage caused by rejection, through writing or speaking about her feelings. Reading the book precipitates her new insight into herself and how she has bottled her feelings of rejection all these years.

Another Black reader identified with Melanin in this incident, and was saddened by it.

> I thought the statement he made after the White boys on the beach picked on him was very touching. It was, "I felt stupid then, dark and ugly-alone. It made me hate White people in a way I hadn't thought about hating them before." Now here's a boy who did not think about hating White people because they never affected his life, but as soon as they did it was in a negative way. Maybe it's better for people to be separate sometimes.

This reader seemed to imagine herself in Melanin Sun's place, as she reacted to being treated in a demeaning way by the White teenagers. She also considered a rearranging of the world, but in a less hopeful way: "Maybe it's better for people to be separate sometimes."

A Latina reader from Group A responded to Melanin's anger at White people.

> Mel speaks of his reasons for eliminating White people from his world. He gives examples of how he was stereotyped because he was black. He doesn't hate White people, but they just don't belong in his world. In my

> neighborhood, there are mostly black people. I live in the projects, and I am always stereotyped because of it.

This student identified with Melanin. She went on to say, "I have been rejected for jobs because of my crime-ridden neighborhood, which is very unfair." Her ongoing feelings of unfairness about how she has been treated suggest a rejection of the possibility of establishing trusting relationships with White people.

The beach incident elicited strong feelings of identification from the Black and Latina women in Group A. In this episode, as in the earlier one affirming Melanin's blackness, they found themselves in the book, this time looking out at the world through the eyes of a Black adolescent boy. In this case, they were stimulated to question the wisdom of seeking relationships to White people:

"Maybe it's better for people to be separate sometimes."

"He doesn't hate White people, but they just don't belong in his world."

In their response to this episode in the book, Black and Latina readers give voice to their own frustrations regarding the indignities people like themselves suffer on a daily bases in a White world. These are common feelings, well-known to Black people living in a White world, but what may be uncommon is the opportunity to have these feelings reflected back to them in a piece of children's literature.

White students in Group B also reflected on the larger issues of being stereotyped due to neighborhood or race. They did not include personal stories of discrimination, nor enter into an examination of their own possible roles in regard to such attitudes. However, they identified with Melanin, and their responses to this same passage revealed their ability to enter into the world of a black teenager with feelings of empathy and dismay. One reader wrote:

> Walking on the beach Melanin encounters a bunch of White boys that pass

> comments about "how dark" his skin is. They made him feel "dark and ugly." This makes me feel bad for Melanin for letting these boys get the best of him.

This reader, a young White woman, looked at the situation depicted in the novel in more universal terms, as the problem of a teenager letting his peers put him down, "getting the best of him." She did not speak of the pain and helplessness Melanin feels as a Black person, as did the students in Group A, nor did she comment on the larger meaning of race and color in White and Black contexts. In contrast to the journals of the Black readers, when this reader wrote in her journal of Melanin's thoughts and experiences about being Black in a White world, she merely noted these important elements of Melanin's story:

> Melanin states that he doesn't have a lot of reason to spend time with White people -they don't live near him or go to his school.

> He sounded annoyed when he stated that, "this was our place - people of color together in harmony away from all (White people's) hatred and racism."

She wrote that the character sounded "annoyed," but did not comment on her own feelings about an expression of racial solidarity that excluded her and others of her group. In response to a different passage, another White reader also commented on the development of the story, without including her own feelings as someone White, the outsider in this passage:

> He was so surprised to see that his mother's friend was White. Everything he thought about from that moment on was about White people and how there had never been a White person in his house before, never in his world or in his surroundings.

She did not write about her own surprise or discomfort at Melanin's feelings, but her words, "everything he thought about . . . was about White people," suggest that this was an important issue for her. Her journal continued to include comments on this crucial scene:

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> Melanin talks about stereotypes of Black people (i.e. usually in jail or committing a crime) and what White people think. Now it seemed to be everywhere in his mind.

Another reader, reflecting on the same passage, seemed to reject the insider's view of stereotyping:

> (Melanin) talks about he doesn't like White people. Is he a racist? Are these White people racist for showing these events? Or, is it the truth that they are being showed (sic) because 80% of arrests are of Black people, and most violence occurs in Black communities?

This reader began to raise a question about the perspective in the novel: "Are these White people racist for showing these events?" She countered her question with what she had previously perceived as the "truth." She may not have encountered Black voices in a sympathetic context previously, and although she did not pursue her own question in the journal response, it may indicate a beginning consciousness of the need to reconsider her own views.

Engagement with this novel may have allowed some White readers the discovery that other people experience the world in ways that they do not. Journal entries revealed the beginnings of an examination of their own relation to this world, a rearrangement of their views of their own place vis a vis Blacks in a (mostly) White world. Their comments on these experiences and attitudes indicate that their reading involved dissonance at some level, questioning racism in both Black and White communities. They discovered themselves feeling empathy for a character who speaks of alienation from Whites, and who is always conscious of his color. This discovery has the potential to expand their sense of who they are, knowing themselves more fully by recognizing perspectives that differ from what they already know.

Our study indicates that when Black readers found themselves in their reading of From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun, they seemed to find space to reflect on who they are and to

release their own stories. When White readers spoke about the book, they needed to find a way in, but it left them mostly looking in from outside. Reading children's literature with protagonists from diverse backgrounds can serve different functions. Some readers may experience an affirmation of themselves, while others may find themselves engaged with the lives of different others. For African American children and adults, reading literature by and about Black people enables them to make personal connections and envision possible lives, possible selves, and other lives (Athanases, 1998; Bruner, 1986; McGinley and Kamberelis, 1996). For other readers of all backgrounds, reading and discussing literature by and about Black people has the potential to raise questions about how we construct differences. White readers of multicultural literature may find themselves in their reading, but may also find that an aesthetic response has to include a distancing, a realization of different experiences. As they engage in a text, these readers may be "drawn in but not (always) identifying" (Lewis, 2000). We believe our data illustrates contrasting responses between Black and White readers of From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun. To some degree, the book may have helped to release new perspectives for members of both groups. At the same time, for change to take place, readers need to feel that their preconceptions are challenged. The classroom or other settings in which these conversations about books take place must be safe, but readers have to be made to feel uncomfortable, too.

Our study leaves us with incompletely answered questions regarding the role of text and context. We need to clarify what kind of context the book created for different readers. We need to ask how far a text can be expected to take the reader. What is the role of discussion? What is the impact of teaching which provokes readers to look more deeply and to engage in a critical analysis of their own responses?

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